

Shanna Swendson
Paint the Town
Red

An Enchanted Inc. Short Story



PAINT THE TOWN RED

A Short Story Set in the World of Enchanted, Inc.

Shanna Swendson

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Whenever magical malfeasance is afoot, Sam's your man. Or gargoyle, as the case may be. As head of security for Magic, Spells, and Illusions, Inc., Sam makes sure the company's people and secrets are safe. In his spare time, he keeps an eye on the city, looking for skullduggery that only a magical gargoyle can take care of.

When he spots an alarming outbreak of garden gnomes, he knows there's danger brewing—and not just because of the kitsch overload. He recognizes what those shiny red hats really mean, and if he doesn't take action tonight, more blood will be shed by the morning.

This short story set in the universe of the Enchanted, Inc., series offers a glimpse into the world of one of the most popular secondary characters and what he does when he's not helping Katie Chandler save the company from bad magic.

Paint the Town Red

The name's Sam, and the city is my beat. I'm not a cop, not in the strictest sense. But I do keep the peace, in a manner of speakin', regarding a very particular type of activity. Mostly, the kind of stuff real cops couldn't begin to handle. I do have a real job, with specific duties, but I consider it a matter of public service to keep an eye out for things that shouldn't be happenin' and things that shouldn't be there.

Like, say, a garden gnome on an apartment building rooftop.

I don't have anything against gnomes, mind you. Some of my best friends are gnomes. But they aren't anything like those cute things people put in their gardens. And those cute things people put in their gardens aren't much like what those people think they are—and they're a whole lot like something else they really wouldn't want lurking outside their homes. Trust me on that one.

I dropped down to get a better look, since I consider rooftops to fall within my jurisdiction (did I mention I'm a gargoye?). There the thing was, holding its fishing pole, looking all quaint and olde worlde with its red hat. Its very shiny red hat, that looked like it had been freshly painted. That was an ominous sign, and if it meant what I thought it meant, we were in for some trouble.

There was no garden in sight. This wasn't even one of the rooftops that people tried to turn into something resembling a garden. It was just a flat, tarred roof, without so much as a beat-up lawn chair on it. Either someone had swiped the gnome as a prank and was hiding it where no one without wings was likely to find it, or there was something fishy goin' on. I made a note of the location and took back to the sky.

A few blocks over, there was another one, this time perched rather precariously on a fire escape and holding an axe. Its hat had shiny, red paint, too. I spotted three more on my way to the office. In the suburbs or a small town, that wouldn't have been a lot, but this was New York, where opportunities for lawn ornaments are somewhat limited and where most people don't really do "cute" or quaint unless they're bein' ironic. Then again, those folks were really big on trends, so if some pop star had a garden gnome on her balcony, next thing you knew, all the lemmings woulda gone out and got one for themselves.

I made another pass after dark, 'cause that's when things that shouldn't be happenin' tend to happen. All I saw was a couple of muggings down in dark alleys that those muggers won't soon forget. That's because the places where I saw the gnomes no longer had gnomes. Interesting. Very interesting.

The next morning when I flew over the same spots, there were police outside two of the buildings and a coroner's van outside another. Now, I know there is such a thing as coincidence, and a lot of people die or come to harm

every day in a city this size, but that was a bit much for my taste. Something fishy was goin' on, in my city, and that made me mad.

I did a grid search and found what looked to be the same gnomes, just in different places, and with even shinier red hats. Damn. That was not what I wanted it to be. Those things were hard to kill, and they'd suck the city dry.

You see, vampires aren't the most dangerous bloodsuckers out there. Oh, sure, they get all the press, the TV shows, the movies, the books. But there is something much worse, and it's not at all sexy or brooding or anything else that makes humans so fascinated with vampires.

What we had was an infestation of Red Caps. These are nasty little gnome-like creatures who wear cute red hats, and, yeah, they look a lot like something an old lady would put in her flower garden. If you had one of those in your garden and knew what it really was, you'd take a sledgehammer to it right away. Because know how that cute red hat got that way? Blood. And it has to stay fresh. If the blood dries out and the hat isn't red anymore, the creature dies. No big loss, from my point of view, but from their point of view, well, you can see where they might wanna prevent that, so they kill. And kill. And kill some more. Every night, until they run out of victims.

Somebody had to do something, and as was so often the case, that somebody would have to be me. I found a gnome sitting on the roof of an older building and perched in a nice gargoyle pose on the corner of the roof. This one was a girl gnome, without the beard but with a cute little apron and a rosy, round-cheeked face. And then I waited. If you've ever wanted to watch a staring contest between two inanimate objects, this would have been your night. Neither of us moved a muscle—probably because she didn't come to life until after dark and because I'm a gargoyle and that's what we do. Or don't do, to be more accurate. Sure, I can move and talk and fly and all, but that's because of magic. Sittin' still is my natural state.

When it got good and dark, she came to life. Her face wasn't nearly as rosy and round-cheeked when it wasn't frozen into a sweet smile. All her dimples faded as her face re-formed itself into a scowl and her lips curled back from sharp, jagged teeth. She pulled a long, vicious-looking knife out of her apron, and it may have been a trick of the moonlight, but I thought the blade looked stained or rusty.

She didn't seem to notice I was there, which was good for a couple of reasons. For one, it meant when I acted, it would come as a surprise. For another, it meant she wasn't observant enough to notice that a new gargoyle had appeared on the roof since she settled down for the day, and I figured that could work in my favor.

I waited to see what she'd do before I made my move. She stood still for a while, like she was gettin' her bearings or tryin' to decide what to do. With the hand that wasn't holding the knife, she reached up to touch her hat, and when she brought it back, it was only slightly smeared with blood. She gave an animalistic hiss as she headed for the door that led into the building.

That was my cue. I spread my wings and took off, beating her to the door. “Where ya goin’, dollface?” I asked.

She came to a dead stop, so still she almost looked like a garden gnome again. It took her a second or two, but she even got that insipid jolly look back onto her face. She batted her eyelashes at me, forced a dimple to appear in her cheek, then said, “Oh, good sir, I am new to this town, and I am afraid I lost my garden.” Too late, she remembered that she was holding a bloody knife, and she quickly hid it behind her back.

“Nice try, sister,” I said. “I know what you are, and you’re not gonna do your thing in my town, capiche?”

She tried another eyelash bat and ever so subtly tugged at her skirt to hike it up and reveal her legs. Not that there was much to see in the way of gams, what with the legs barely long enough to reach the ground and the knee-high boots that nearly reached her hips. It looked like I was bein’ femme-fataled by a garden gnome. With my line of work, you’d think I’d seen damn near everything, but this was a first. “Won’t you please help me, mister?” she purred in a squeaky voice. “I’m all alone in this city with no friends. A gal like me needs friends.”

“Well, I don’t think I’m the kind of friend you need, sweetheart, seein’ as I’m made of stone, which means I ain’t got no blood to keep your pretty hat nice and red. And you’re gonna have to go through me to get more blood. I did mention I was made of stone, right?”

She made a few sobbing sounds and went to wipe her tears off her face until she realized she was holding a knife in that hand, which she hurried to hide again. It looked like the gal had seen a few movies and knew her part. Problem was, I’d seen the same movies, and I knew that a dame like that was up to no good.

I’m kinda ashamed about what happened next, and I have to admit that she beat me. While she was still fake crying and I was still rolling my eyes at her, she suddenly darted to the side and dove down a pipe. Now, I got a lot of skills, but if lightning fast is what you need, a gargoyle probably isn’t your best bet. We’re not generally known for our speed. I’m also better in the air, and she scooted around down low. The pipe was way too small for me, even if I folded my wings as tight as possible, so I just flew over the roof and found an open window leading into a hallway.

The next trick was findin’ the dame inside the building. I figured I could listen for the screams, but by then it might be too late to do anything more than prevent further deaths. I flew up and down the hallway, listening with every sense I got—which includes more than the usual ones. I didn’t think she’d go too far down in the building. Wherever that pipe let out first, that would be where she went. That meant she’d probably be on the left side of the hallway ... and, yeah, there was a kind of scufflin’ sound coming from behind a door.

A locked door—even with the multiple locks they use in this city—doesn’t

do much to keep someone like me out, on account of the fact that I've got some magic. I'm not a wizard, but I can do a trick or two, and openin' doors is one of my specialties. A quick wave of a paw, and the door opened ever so silently for me.

It was one of those one-room numbers so many people in this city have to put up with—your bedroom doubles as your sitting room, and you can reach the stove without leavin' the sofa. You'd get more luxurious accommodations in a shoebox, and I don't get why people are willing to live that way when there's all that lovely rooftop space in this city.

But never mind that. The important thing is that the girlie gnome was there, approaching the figure asleep on the sofa bed with her stained knife. I took to the air and glided over her, reaching down with a foot to knock the knife out of her hand. She could have probably killed the guy with her teeth and claws if she hadn't looked up to see what happened to her knife. As it was, I had time to swoop back and grab her to jerk her away from her intended victim.

As I did so, the would-be victim woke up and shouted. I headed straight for the window and flew up the narrow airshaft between buildings. With any luck, the guy would go right back to sleep and then bore everyone in his office the next morning by describing in great detail this bizarre dream he had about being attacked by a garden gnome and rescued by a gargoyle. That's not the kind of thing most people can convince themselves to believe really happened once the sun comes up—unless maybe they later come across a rusty, bloodstained knife that somehow fell between the back of their sofa bed and the wall.

I took the gnome back to the roof, but I didn't let her go. I just sat on her. "It's not gonna happen tonight, sweetheart," I told her. "I'm not the kind of guy who dashes in the middle of the night. I'll be here with you until the sun comes up."

She started cryin'—real tears this time, not that crocodile job she tried to pull before. "You can't! You can't!" she sobbed. "I'll die. I need blood."

"Yeah, and I need an anti-pigeon spell that actually works, but I suspect you and me both are in for some disappointment tonight."

She took another tack, goin' back to femme fatale mode. "Well, if you're going to stay with me all night, we might as well make it interesting." She gave a seductive squirm, and if you can't imagine something that looks like a garden gnome giving a seductive squirm, I don't suggest you try too hard.

"Save it, doll. You're not my type. For one thing, you don't got wings. For another, you live off blood—and not even eatin' the flesh. Just smearin' it on your hat. That's a real turn-off for me. And while I'm at it, the fishnet hose don't go with the garden boots, I'm just sayin'."

The light was dim, but it's never truly dark in the city, and I could see her hat growing less and less shiny. She stopped struggling, probably trying to save her strength. Lucky for me, that also meant she quit talkin' for a while.

It must have been an hour or so later before she said very softly, "I'm

dying.” I wasn’t sure which act she was tryin’ to pull now, if she was tryin’ to pull anything at all. She was kinda like the innocent-seemin’ gal who goes all vulnerable to hire the private eye at the beginnin’ of the story, before she breaks down in fake tears, but she might just have been too weak for any more games.

“Yeah, that is kinda the idea.”

She bared her jagged teeth at me and hissed. “I could kill you.”

“Wouldn’t do you much good, even if you managed it. I’m made of stone, so there’s no blood. You wouldn’t be able to re-dye your hat with my juices.”

“There are more of us out there.”

“Yeah, I know, and I’ll get my people on it.”

“There’s nothing you can do to stop us.”

“Did I mention that ‘my people’ includes wizards? They just have to keep your people trapped where they spend the day, and as I’m learning here and now, letting the blood on your hats dry does seem to do you in.”

She finally went totally limp under my claws, not yet dead, but at least acting like she’d given up. “Who’s your favorite?” she asked.

“Favorite what?”

“Detective, in the old movies. Are you a Sam Spade guy, or more of a Philip Marlowe fella?”

“I thought I recognized those moves.”

“And I should have known you would.”

“Yeah, well, then you shoulda known I couldn’t let you kill that guy. I keep this city safe from the likes of you.”

“Here’s lookin’ at you,” she whispered before going still and stiff.

“That one wasn’t a detective,” I said, but I knew she wouldn’t hear me. The sun was coming up, and her hat had dried to a dull brown. Now she was just a garden gnome again—one with a brownish hat and, if you looked carefully, a sliver of fishnet between her boots and the hem of her skirt.

With her body clutched carefully between my feet, I flew to the office. If she didn’t come back to life at dusk, then we’d know that all we had to do was keep them from killing for one night. And then we could probably stock a garden center with bargain gnomes that just needed a little paint touch-up.

THE END

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About this Series

You have just read *Paint the Town Red*, a short story set in the world of Enchanted, Inc.

Books in the Enchanted, Inc. Series:

1. *Enchanted, Inc.*
2. *Once Upon Stilettoes*
3. *Damsel Under Stress*
4. *Don't Hex with Texas*
5. *Much Ado About Magic*
6. *No Quest for the Wicked*
7. *Kiss and Spell*
8. *Frogs and Kisses*

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An Excerpt from *Enchanted, Inc.*

By Shanna Swendsen

I'd always heard that New York City was weird, but I had no idea just how weird until I got here. Before I left Texas to move here, my family tried to talk me out of it, telling me all sorts of urban legends about the strange and horrible things that happened in the big bad city. Even my college friends who'd been living in New York for a while told me stories about the weird and wonderful things they'd seen that didn't cause the natives to so much as blink. My friends joked that an alien from outer space could walk down Broadway without anyone looking twice. I used to think they were exaggerating.

But now, after having survived a year in the city, I still saw things every day that shocked and amazed me but didn't cause anyone else to so much as raise an eyebrow. Nearly naked street performers, people doing tap-dance routines on the sidewalk, and full-scale film productions—complete with celebrities—weren't worth a second glance to the locals, while I couldn't help but gawk. It made me feel like such a hick, no matter how hard I tried to act sophisticated.

Take this morning, for instance. The girl ahead of me on the sidewalk was wearing wings—those strap-on fairy wings people wear as part of a Halloween costume. Halloween was more than a month away, and while I couldn't afford designer fashions, I read enough fashion magazines to know that fairy wings were not a current fashion statement. She must be some neo-bohemian trendsetter from NYU, I thought, or maybe in the costume design program. She'd done a really good job on the wings because the straps were invisible, making it look like she had real wings. They even fluttered slightly, but that was probably just the wind currents from walking.

I forced my attention away from Miss Airy Fairy to check my watch, then groaned. There was no way I'd make it to work on time if I walked, and my boss was usually lying in wait for me on Monday mornings, so I didn't dare come in even a minute late. I'd have to take the subway to work, even though it would take a precious two dollars off my MetroCard. I'd make up for it by walking home, I promised myself.

When I reached the Union Square station, I was surprised to see Miss Airy Fairy head down into the subway ahead of me instead of continuing toward the university. People who work downtown tend not to dress like that for work. As I followed her down the stairs, I noticed that she wore what must have been platform shoes with Lucite soles, which gave her the appearance of floating a couple of inches off the ground. She moved remarkably gracefully for someone wearing what had to be pretty clunky shoes.

As usual, no one on the platform gave her a second glance. I'd been here a year, and I'd yet to exchange one of those knowing "only in New York" glances with anyone. How could everyone be so jaded? Surely there were people around who were newer to the city than I was, and then there were the tourists, who were supposed to stare at everything.

But then I noticed a guy looking at Miss Airy Fairy. He didn't seem shocked or surprised, though. Instead, he smiled at her like he knew her. That in and of itself was odd because he didn't seem the type to spend his weekends wearing a cape and playing Middle Earth in Central Park. He looked like a typical Wall Street type, wearing a well-tailored dark suit and carrying a briefcase—the kind of Mr. Right that just about every career girl in New York hopes to snag. I'd guess he was a few years older than me, and he was quite good-looking, even if he was a little shorter than average.

Mr. Right (if he wasn't mine, he had to be somebody's) glanced at his watch, then up the tunnel, like he was looking for the next train. He muttered something under his breath—probably something like "Where is that train?" or "I'm going to be late"—twitched his wrist, and next thing I knew, I heard the rumble that signaled an approaching train. If I didn't know better, I would have thought he summoned it. I wasn't complaining because I needed the train myself.

The waiting passengers shoved their way onto the train, then the conductor's voice came over the PA system, saying, "Attention passengers. Due to a one time situation, this Brooklyn-bound N train will stop next at City Hall. If you need stops prior to this, please exit the train here and board an R train or another N train. Thank you."

There was a chorus of mutters and groans as passengers poured out of the train. I took a now-empty seat and looked at my watch. At this rate I'd be early to work. This wasn't a bad way to start the week.

Mr. Right was still on board, as was Miss Airy Fairy. Mr. Right exchanged a grin with the guy sitting next to me. I turned to look at that guy and then wondered if there was a polite way I could move to another seat without it being obvious that I was avoiding him.

He looked like the kind of guy who spends his lifetime defending against sexual harassment charges, the kind who thinks of himself as so irresistible that he can't imagine his advances being unwanted. Unfortunately, that type is never as attractive as he'd like to think. This one wasn't exactly hideous. With a little effort and the right personality he might not have been so bad. Unfortunately, he made no effort at all, so that his hair was poorly styled and greasy, while his skin would have made my mother, the Mary Kay representative, faint in horror. But he acted like he thought every woman on that train should be drooling over him, which made him even more unattractive to me.

The funny thing was, all the women on the train were looking at him over the tops of their books and newspapers like they thought Pierce Brosnan had

joined us on the subway car, and he grinned at them like he was totally used to that kind of attention. Maybe they could tell he was particularly well-endowed. Or maybe he was a famous rock star I didn't recognize. I wasn't hip enough to know what most rock stars looked like. He had the kind of smug slickness you'd expect from a famous rock star who didn't have to do anything to make women fall at his feet.

As for me, I'd rather look at Mr. Right, who was getting his fair share of admiring glances but who looked shy about it, not like he expected the attention. That made him infinitely cuter in my book.

"On your way to work?" Slick asked. It wasn't among the top five pickup lines I'd ever heard. Not that I heard a lot of them.

"Actually, I just like being crammed like sardines in an underground tin can to head to lower Manhattan in the morning," I said.

He stretched his arm out along the back of the seat, like he was angling to put his arm around me. I'm from a part of the world that still has drive-in movies, so I recognized the move and edged away as subtly as I could. "You're obviously not a native New Yorker," he said, oozing charm like my dad's old tractor oozes oil. "I love your accent."

Little did he know, but he wasn't paying me a compliment. As effective as the steel magnolia routine could be when I was asking for something or trying to get my way, it was a liability at work, where everyone seemed to think my Texas drawl meant I was dumber and less educated than they were. I'd been trying to lose my accent, but it kept slipping out when I was being particularly sarcastic. I guess I inwardly thought the drawl took the sting out of whatever ugly thing I'd just said. In this case, it seemed to have worked, just when I didn't want it to.

I wished I'd brought a book to bury my face in, but I'd planned to walk to and from work when I left the apartment, so I hadn't brought anything to read. In fact, the only things in my oh-so-professional-looking briefcase were my sack lunch and my dressier shoes for the office. Instead, I just gave Slick a glare and turned my attention to Mr. Right. Maybe he'd have a Galahad complex and feel compelled to rescue me from the subway stalker.

Then I noticed that Slick was looking at Mr. Right as well, and suddenly his face was totally serious. Mr. Right, also serious, nodded his head slightly. Miss Airy Fairy was also staring at me. Now I couldn't help but wonder if this was a conspiracy. Were they going to rob me or try to scam me? Goodness knows, I might as well have been wearing a big yellow button saying "Hick from Out of Town! Please take advantage of me!"

Just then the door between cars opened and a giant chicken entered our car. To be more precise, it was a bored-looking man in a chicken suit—and how sad was it that he was more bored than embarrassed to be wearing that costume in public? I added to my mental list of jobs that were worse than mine. He shook a little plastic box in his left hand, and clucking sounds came out of it. I felt a pang of homesickness, for I used to have one like it on my

desk back in Texas. I wouldn't dare put it on my desk here. It would only reinforce the hick stereotype. At the clucking sound, everyone looked up, reacted with mild amusement, then immediately went back to reading or avoiding eye contact. The chicken man then tried to hand flyers to everyone in the car. I hadn't yet learned the technique for avoiding flyers that most New Yorkers seem to have honed, so I took one from him. A new fried-chicken restaurant was opening, which gave me another moment of homesickness as I remembered family Sunday dinners. I tucked the flyer into my briefcase.

This incident didn't do much toward helping me understand New Yorkers. Fairy wings on the subway weren't worth noticing, but a guy in a chicken suit got a slight reaction. Both outfits involved wings. Why was one humdrum while the other was at least a little bit amusing? I noticed that Mr. Right had also taken a flyer. He was smiling and staring at the chicken man, which made me like him even more. Or, it would have if he didn't seem to be in cahoots with the other two, who were still looking at me funny. I forgot about the giant chicken as I remembered why I felt ill at ease.

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About the Author



SHANNA SWENDSON earned a journalism degree from the University of Texas and used to work in public relations but decided it was more fun to make up the people she wrote about, so now she's a full-time novelist. She's the author of *Rebel Mechanics* and the popular adult romantic-fantasy series *Enchanted, Inc.* She lives in Irving, Texas, with several hardy houseplants and too many books to fit on the shelves.

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Shanna Swendson

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978-1-62051-259-3

Cover Illustration: Sarah 'Pickles' Dill

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